Seeing and Speaking: A Reply to Professor Wolterstorff

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I welcome Professor Wolterstorff's gloss on my reading of *theoria* as "that mode of contemplation which, rather than being disinterested and disengaged, is participatory, in that it incorporates acknowledgement of the worth of what is contemplated," and of art (or craft) as a "making visible of what is worthy of such participatory contemplation." This becomes the turning point between what Professor Wolterstorff describes as my account of liturgy and the alternative he proposes. He has a different understanding of the kind of participation liturgy is meant to foster. For him, what is fundamental is not "the contemplation of some pattern in the kosmos, nor . . . of some work of art." The fundamental model "is that of engagement with a person." This person is God.

One objection he makes to my recollection of the classical Greeks is that they "all thought of the divine as impersonal." But I sense a further objection, in that the persons whom liturgy enables us to engage include other human persons as well. I can easily see how the way in which we are used to thinking about contemplation would seem to exclude this interpersonal dimension. The way of thinking about contemplation I am proposing is different, of course, but not enough to satisfy Professor Wolterstorff, who thinks of liturgy "as being, in good measure, not contemplation but dialogue. The people address God . . . God addresses the people," and the people address one another.

Professor Wolterstorff's appeal to dialogue is, I take it, literal. It is a direct speaking and listening between persons, or subjects. "Throughout the liturgy," he argues,"God's presence is not that of some object to be contemplated, but that of one who acts . . . We speak to God and God speaks to us. When God speaks, we listen. We do not look . . . we listen." For Professor Wolterstorff, contemplation is not only different from, it is exclusive of dialogue; while we can "contemplate" other persons, to do so is to reduce them to the status of an object, a "spectacle" in the usual sense.

The ancient Greeks did not see it this way, Professor Wolterstorff concedes, precisely because they were too busy looking. For "the classical Greek philosophers," at least, "the primary metaphors for our relation to the divine were visual." In the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, by contrast, "the primary metaphors are verbal and auditory." These are the antique sources in which Professor Wolterstorff's account of liturgy has its roots.

Let us turn, first, to the methodological issues. Professor Wolterstorff and I have different conceptions of where and how philosophical ideas might be situated. The sources to which I am primarily returning are not "the classical Greek philosophers," though I do mention them. In fact, the ideas about theory and practice, craft and contemplation that I develop in the lecture are not usually associated with Plato and Aristotle. I mention them partly to show that their ways of thinking might have roots that are even more "antique" than most modern interpreters take them to be (that they echo a more ancient understanding of *theoria* and *techne*). This is not to say that these roots are practical rather than philosophical. It is an attempt to locate philosophical contemplation in a "doing"—like dancing, or shipbuilding—rather than a purely intellectual (or detached) kind of vision. Meanwhile, my references to Homer should remind us that the gods of the Greeks were, in fact, highly personalized. The idea of *kosmos* as a formally abstract but concretely realized pattern suggestive of divinity was not one that philosophers like
Plato and Aristotle introduced only later on. The Greeks who saw the divine come to light (and to life) in the patterns of a woven cloth were the same Greeks who thought and talked about the gods in highly personalized ways.

When Professor Wolterstorff complains that my philological approach is guided more by "philosophical interests" than the "painstaking work of the lexicographer," I suspect it is not my interest in the origins of these words so much as the speculative use I make of them that concerns him. While I am not a lexicographer, I have taken care (if not pains) in treating these words as I have. A return to the etymological roots of *theoria* faces obvious challenges. As an historical reversion, it can seem hopelessly nostalgic. But while certain ancient practices are clearly irrelevant to our contemporary situation, questions raised by the forms of understanding embodied in those practices cannot be so easily dismissed. Questions like: How might contemplation "serve"? What can music "do"?

In reality, I am not so much rejecting modern views (as Professor Wolterstorff takes Heideggerians to be doing) and replacing them with ancient ones as attempting to open a space for ways of thinking, and of understanding what we are doing, that certain aspects of modern culture tend to militate against. Consider the liturgical function of music. Is it just an "instrument" (a means to an end)? In thinking about it this way, we tend to relegate its inherent qualities as art to a secondary level of importance. If we say that it is an end in itself, this makes it sound (to modern ears) as if it is no longer serving God. But a different way of thinking is available to us—one that reveres God in the work. This is the way of thinking I propose in my lecture, using the language of recollection (and forgetting). In using this language I have in mind the (ancient) sense of *anamnesis*, which is not just a re-cognizing, or remembering across a distance, but is more like a re-enactment. This kind of knowing is still with us (the communion service, or celebration of the Eucharist, like the seder meal, is an exercise in *anamnesis*).

This brings us to the substantial point about liturgy, and the gap that, in Professor Wolterstorff's mind, still separates "seeing" from speaking and hearing (and acting). Here I want to emphasize that I am not proposing a theory of liturgy. The strangeness of my title was meant to suggest that we could think differently about certain aspects of liturgy by first thinking about what it means to "theorize" and about the practical nature of contemplation. The question that primarily concerns me is not what liturgy as such is or does, but how the function of art in worship and liturgy could be better understood (and better realized). I wanted to show that it is possible for us to conceive of this function, not in purely instrumental terms, but in the Greek sense of *ergon*. What we stand to gain from this effort is a renewed appreciation of the importance, for liturgy, of beauty, wonder and awe. The extent to which this has been eclipsed by a concern with "accessibility" (among other things) is a matter for further discussion. (The eclipse of poetic and figurative language in liturgy itself, and especially in hymnody, is, I think, a symptom of this.) It is not an etymological coincidence that *ergon* is what puts the "uryg" in liturgy. Liturgy takes the form of service, but it can be understood neither as a mere production, nor as merely a product. Something can be an end-in-itself and still serve God. Music can function liturgically by being artful.

Here is where I would question Professor Wolterstorff's distinction between the Greek preoccupation with "seeing" and the Hebrew-Christian preoccupation with speaking and listening. In *theoria* or in craft, as maker or beholder one does not "see" God face-to-face; one sees traces of God's work by participating in that work. Professor Wolterstorff himself speaks of
theoria, or contemplative seeing, as "incorporating" acknowledgement of the worth of what is contemplated. While he may not have intended it this way, I tried to stress the full-fledged embodiment—the richly experiential nature—of this kind of seeing. Theoria is not just passive "looking." It involves all the senses, and is essentially active.

Professor Wolterstorff says that "dialogue is the mark of the engagement of persons who are in full possession of their personhood." I would suggest that this sort of engagement requires not just that we "look at" one another, as self-possessed subjects, but that we be fully present to one another. Many forms of dialogue fall short of this. Contemplative seeing, as I characterize it, involves an openness and receptivity—it allows for a "presencing"—that, I would argue, is a condition for any genuinely dialogical encounter. Rather than excluding dialogue, contemplation could be said to nourish it (while art and music provide the occasion for, and nourish, contemplation).

Perhaps liturgy has—or needs to have—two axes: the dialogical and the contemplative. I am reminded, in this context, of Paul Ricoeur's reflections on what he terms manifestation and proclamation. Neither can do without the other. One heeds the call as well as the exhortation to behold (where the beholding issues in praise). It was a happy coincidence that our exchange took place on the first Sunday after Easter. While I am no biblical exegete (any more than I am a lexicographer), I have always been struck by the complex interweaving of seeing and speaking—of dialogue, spectacle, and wonder—in the post-resurrection narratives, especially in the Gospels of Luke and John (I want to thank William Porter for reminding me of this). The women see the empty tomb, and are "perplexed" (Luke 24:4; all quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version). Peter sees the linen wrappings, and is "amazed" (Luke 24:12). John "saw and believed" (John 20:8–9). In Luke's account, the women see two men "in dazzling clothes" who reminded them of what they had been told. They convey these words to the apostles, who do not believe them (24:41; "for as yet they did not understand the scripture," John 20:9). In John's account Mary sees Jesus, and yet does not see him until he speaks her name. Only then does she declare, "I have seen the Lord" (20:14–18). On the road to Emmaus two of the apostles encounter Jesus, "but their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (Luke 24:16). They tell him what has happened, and he rebukes them for not understanding what the scriptures had foretold all along (24:17–27). Jesus' own interpretation of these sayings does not yet enable them to see the truth, or recognize his divinity. It was not until he "was at the table with them...took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them" that "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (24:30–31). Only then did they realize that "their hearts were burning...while he was talking to them on the road," and that it was indeed the Lord who had been "opening the scriptures" to them.

What these remarkable passages suggest to me is that "seeing the Lord" is not the same as setting eyes upon him. Neither are listening and understanding—knowing what is being said, and who is speaking—the same as hearing the words. In Luke's account, the apostles are told, they are spoken to directly, and yet they neither see nor hear. Their eyes must somehow be opened. Even where there is dialogue, there must still be revelation. In the prologue to John's Gospel the Word is also "the light" (John was the one who saw the divinity of Christ in the emptiness of the tomb). How this revelation comes about—what occasions it—remains a mystery.
Perhaps this could serve as a formula, if not a model, for thinking about liturgy. According to Professor Wolterstorff, the aim of liturgy "is not contemplation by human persons of the divine but dialogue and sacramental engagement among persons human and divine." The latter is indispensable. But one must still see something in the encounter, and hear something in the words. This is what (I think) music "makes visible." It is something that is indeed worthy of contemplation.